

Iron in Pregnancy

A guide to help pregnant women and their whānau



Introduction

Pregnancy is a time of incredible growth and change, and iron plays a vital role in supporting both mum and baby through this journey. It's essential for building a healthy placenta, the lifeline that nourishes the baby, and for making extra red blood cells needed to carry oxygen around the mother and baby's bodies.

Enjoying iron-rich foods, like New Zealand beef and lamb, can help meet these needs and support a healthy, thriving pregnancy. By having an iron-rich diet throughout pregnancy, mums support their own wellbeing and help build their baby's iron stores (iron held in the body for later use), which lays the foundation for a strong and healthy start to life.

How much iron do pregnant women need?

Pregnancy significantly increases iron requirements to about 27 mg per day, which is around 50% higher than for non-pregnant women. This is because blood volume increases during pregnancy to support the growing baby and placenta, placing greater demand on the mothers' iron stores.

Risk factors for low iron levels during pregnancy can include:

- Low iron stores before conception
- A history of iron deficiency
- A poor or restrictive diet
- Twin or multiple pregnancies
- Gestational diabetes
- Smoking

If iron stores are low at the start of pregnancy, it is more likely that the mother will develop iron deficiency or anaemia. Eating foods rich in iron, particularly from highly absorbable sources, such as New Zealand beef and lamb, can help prevent iron deficiency anaemia. However, for some women, diet alone may not be enough to meet increased needs. In these cases, a lead maternity carer (LMC) or Registered Dietitian may recommend and prescribe oral iron supplements.

Common signs and symptoms of low iron include:

- Fatigue and weakness
- Shortness of breath
- Irritability
- Sensitivity to cold temperatures
- Frequent illness and infections
- Difficulty concentrating

It is not uncommon to feel tired or lack energy when pregnant, so it can be difficult to know if it is normal or a symptom of iron deficiency. If you are concerned, it is important to seek advice from a registered health professional such as your LMC or your GP.

Food sources of iron

Iron can be found in a variety of foods, with two main types: haem iron and non-haem iron.

Haem iron foods



Non-haem iron foods



Haem iron is easily absorbed and found in animal-sourced foods such as red meat, fish and chicken. Beef and lamb are high in iron and are two of the most commonly eaten sources in New Zealand. Eating a varied, balanced diet with up to 500g per week of cooked, lean red meat (about 700-750g raw) is a great way to optimise iron intake during pregnancy.

Non-haem iron, found in plant-based foods such as lentils, beans, spinach, and fortified cereals, is not absorbed as easily.

Combining plant-based iron sources with foods rich in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits or capsicum, can make it easier for your body to absorb non-haem iron. You can find more top tips for iron intake [here](#).

A balanced diet that includes both types of iron is helpful for meeting daily iron needs. If your appetite is lower during pregnancy, try to prioritise iron-rich foods in small portions throughout the day, or when you are feeling your best.

Top iron meals and snacks

Breakfast:

- Scrambled eggs on toast with spinach
- Marmite on toast with pumpkin seeds
- Fortified cereal with chopped strawberries or oranges

Lunch:

- [Spaghetti and beef meatballs](#)
- Homemade wrap with chicken, cheese and salad
- [Lasagne style tortilla boats](#)
- Tuna rice bowl with seasonal greens
- Baked beans on wholegrain toast

Dinner:

- [Beef chow mein](#)
- Roast chicken breast with herbed potatoes and greens
- [One pan lamb rump, lentils and greens](#)
- Honey soy tofu stir-fry with seasonal greens
- [Kūmara and beef nacho bowl with avocado cream](#)

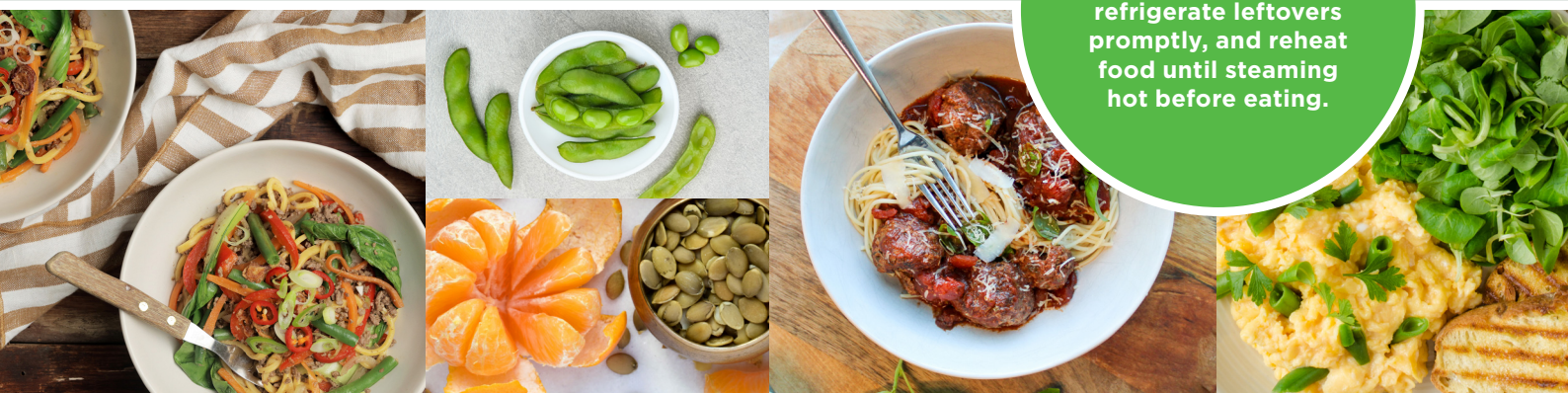
Snacks:

- Lean beef or lamb strips
- Pumpkin seeds and orange segments
- Roasted chickpeas and cherry tomatoes
- Boiled egg with capsicum strips
- Edamame beans
- Dried apricots (2-3)

For other ways to optimise your iron intake, see our [Top Tips for Iron Intake](#) resource. More pregnancy specific guidance is available on [MPI's Food and Pregnancy website](#).

For tasty, iron-rich meal ideas, using nutritious New Zealand beef and lamb, head to [recipes.co.nz](#).

Wash fruit and vegetables well, cook meat until well done, refrigerate leftovers promptly, and reheat food until steaming hot before eating.



Lean red meat can be described as nature's power pack; even a small serve has plenty of nutrients. It is high in iron, and an important part of a healthy balanced diet, alongside wholegrains, fruits, and vegetables.